

# “Walking Tour of Banjul” A History of Major Architectural Works

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Banjul has undergone tremendous changes in its appearance since I (Bill) first saw it in February, 1979. I was a newly arrived Peace Corps Volunteer trainee, and the Peace Corps put us in rooms for several days at the Adonis Hotel, near the Peace Corps office on Lemna Street. The streets were narrower then, bordered by an open sewer system that was not only an eyesore, but also a health hazard.

With support from the international community, the Gambian government has made great strides in improving the infrastructure in Banjul. Streets are wider, most are paved, and sewers are covered. For

a variety of reasons, many of the old buildings that reflect Banjul’s history and growth over the past nearly 200 years are being torn down for future, new construction, rather than being renovated.

This chapter reports on work in progress by the Research and Documentation Division (RDD) of the National Council for Arts and Culture. In recognition of the fact that very little information is currently available for foreign visitors to Banjul about its history of settlement and growth, we devised this project. Our initial goal was to provide tourists with a brief overview of the buildings they would see should they

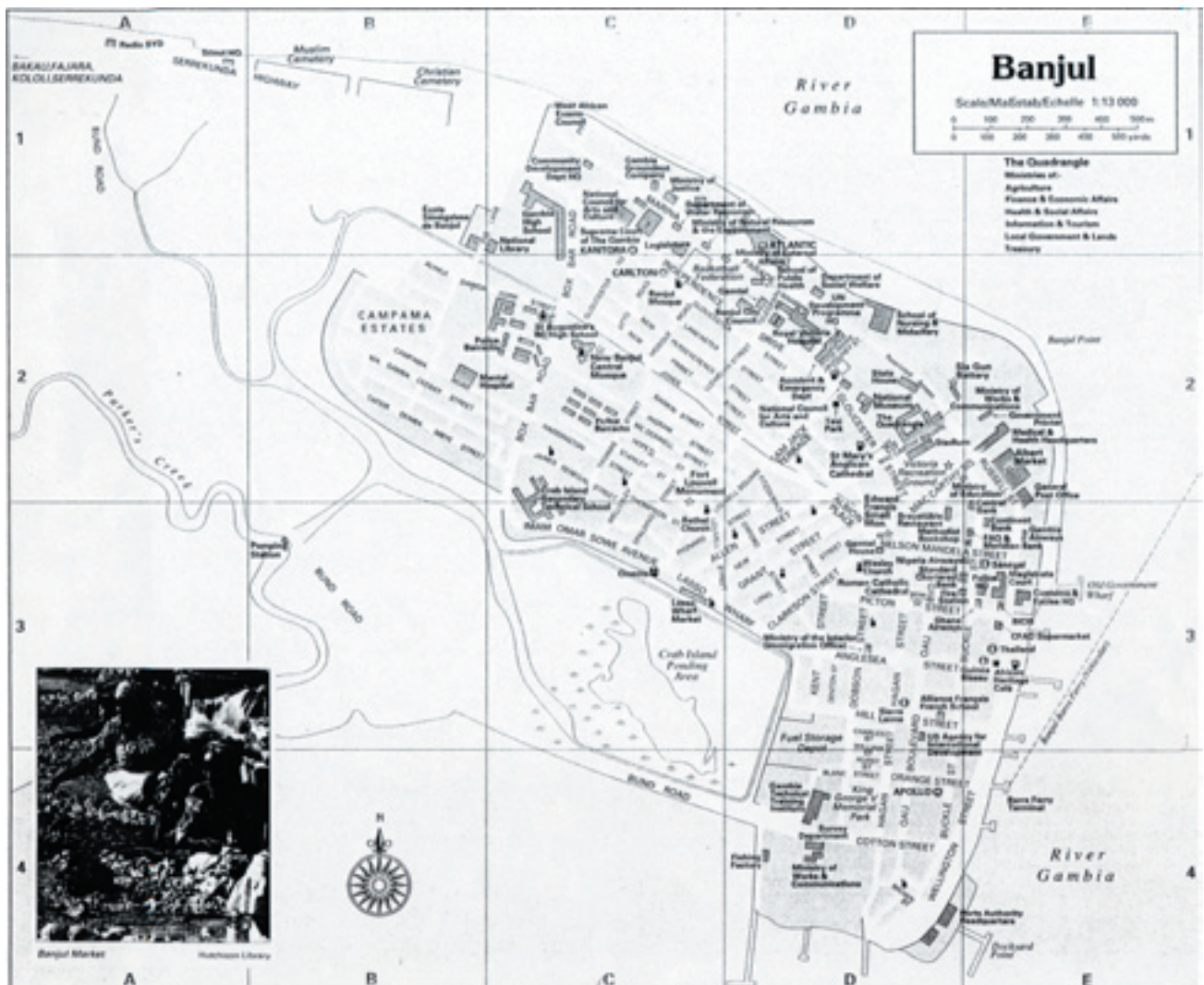


Figure 11.1 Street map for The Gambia’s capital city Banjul, built on St. Mary’s Island.

set out for an hour's walk around town after visiting the National Museum. Although we cannot at this point set out on a map of the city the recommended directions to view its history through its buildings, that is our ultimate goal. In addition, we plan to be able to give much more historic detail about the buildings.

This initial report has been prepared from information collected over a two-week period by RDD staff members. Each staff person identified and spoke with elderly informants living in Banjul to learn as much as they could about the stories associated with some of these buildings. Archival work for many of the buildings remains to be completed. We hope to work with staff members of the National Environment Agency in the future to obtain a more up-to-date map of Banjul.

Bala Saho, the curator for the Research and Documentation Division, prepared the initial draft of this chapter. I have tried to keep my editorial changes minimal and thereby preserve the Gambian voice telling this initial story of Banjul through the buildings that comprise the city.



*Bala Saho, curator for the Research and Documentation division for the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC).*

## Introduction: Early Days of Banjul

St. Mary's Island, on which the city of Banjul (formerly Bathurst) was built, was first occupied in 1816. It was settled primarily for the purpose of building a military fort there for the suppression of the slave trade. However, Earl Bathurst hoped that the protection afforded by the fort would induce British traders and their subjects to live there. A number of British merchants on Gorée Island (located just off the coast of Dakar, the current capital of Senegal) moved to Banjul and transferred their businesses there, too.

In the first few years of its life, the population grew rapidly. In two years, the population was 600, including the garrison. The following year, it jumped to 700, excluding the garrison. In 1826, it had increased to over 1800, of whom 30 were Europeans, excluding the garrison (Gray, 66:306). The revenue to this small island was derived from a duty levied on imports, as conditions for farming were almost nonexistent. The whole island was covered in mud and in salty water.

The garrison included troops almost entirely of officers and men of the Royal African Corps, with a few military offenders, undergoing punishment, sent from other units.

Many of the early settlers included merchants who had earlier settled in Gorée Island after its occupation by the British in 1800. Many of these merchants came with their domestic servants and aides to set up their trade on Banjul Island. The population also included liberated Africans who hailed from Gorée and St. Louis. In later years, settlers also came from Sierra Leone-Freetown. Other settlers came from the surrounding countryside, and soon, sizeable communities sprang up.

Portuguese Town was the trading center and residential quarter of the more wealthy settlers. Melville Town was mainly allotted to artisans and to servants and dependents of the early merchants. It later came to be known as Jolof Town from its main residents. Portuguese Town and Jolof Town were separated by an open space which was the original market place and later became MacCarthy Square, now July 22nd Square. There was also Mocam Town, which later became Half-Die after a cholera epidemic in 1869. All these settlements were separated by strips of open land, intended for cultivation. Unfortunately, the poor soil would not support the raising of any crops.

Today, much of the street layout and settlement pattern of Banjul owes its existence to Alexander the Great and Captain Kelly of the Second West India



*Entrance to July 22nd Square (formerly MacCarthy Square) where the opening ceremony for the Millennium International Roots Homecoming Festival was held.*

Regiment. They were also responsible for the erection of the oldest public buildings. The stones used for their construction were fetched from Dog Island and from off the Barsa Shore. Timber was obtained from the mainland. The first streets were named after Waterloo generals and some of the prominent early merchants.

### Clock Tower

#### The Secretariat/Government Building

This was the first major structure to be built on the island. This building, known originally as the ‘Garrison,’ housed the military population which consisted of officers and men of the Royal African Corps. Many of the officers were reportedly convicted military offenders whose punishment meant service in



*View of the government building and clock tower from the interior courtyard. Several Department of State offices are housed in the building, as are the National Archives.*

posts such as The Gambia, West Africa.

The clock in the tower was mounted in 1892 by the J. Bavreres company. It has served as the first Secretariat Building, and more recently as the Information Ministry. Of late, it is used as the Finance Building and part of the government administrative block. The National Archives are stored in this building.

### The Anglican Church – Independence Drive

The Anglican Church, initially called the English Church (because all the prayers were recited in English), or the “Kings Church,” was built in 1933. It is now called St. Mary’s Cathedral and is owned by the Anglican Mission.



*A view of the Anglican Church from Independence Drive.*



*The Sankandi monument in the Anglican Church courtyard commemorates the deaths of a British travelling commissioner and the police men who were with him in the early 20th century.*

## The Wesleyan Churches The Methodist Church – Dobson Street

The Wesleyan Church was the first church to be built in Banjul and is owned by the Methodist Mission. Its foundation stone was laid on 3 December, 1834. The Mission branch at Stanley Street, known as the Bethel Church, was purposefully built for worshippers at Soldier Town.



*The Wesleyan Church on Dobson street.*

## The Catholic Church – Hagan Street

Banjul's Roman Catholic Church was built from 1913–1916. It was formerly called the Church of the Assumption. As the number of Catholics increased in the colony, more churches were built. The most recent chapel was completed in 1930.



*The Catholic community is relatively small but powerful among the urban elite in Banjul. Here is a front view of the cathedral on Hagan Street.*

Banjul was originally a diocese, which is a Christian geographical area governed by a bishop. The church assumed the status of cathedral when it became the seat of the diocese.

## Boys High School

The Boys High School was built in 1921 and was initially called the Methodist Boys High School, built by the Wesley Mission. Only Christian boys attended the school as Moslems were not interested in attending Christian schools. The name also attested to the fact that only boys were given the privilege of going to school.

In those days, examination for admission to higher education was in two categories: standard four and standard seven. Students who passed the standard four exams were allowed to do their standard seven matriculation exams. Outstanding students were given London matriculation exams.



*The classic architecture of the front entrance stairs to Boys High School.*

## Muhammedan Primary School

As early as 1903, Muslim elders of Banjul appealed to the Governor to have their own school. But it was not until the time of Governor Armitage in 1928 that the Muslim school was built.

Many of the country's prominent Muslims attended this school and were taught by famous pioneers in Gambian education, including Garba Jahumpa, Tomas Javra, and Master Williams. Students were taught Arabic as well as English.



*Muhammedan Primary School is one of the first schools built primarily for Muslim children during the colonial period.*

### St. Augustine's Junior Secondary School

Located on Hagan Street next to the Catholic church, St. Augustine's was built in 1904 under the auspices of the Reverend Father Mayan, the priest in charge of the Catholic mission at the time.

The school was first a primary school and then a secondary school. It was initially called the Hagan Street School, then the Roman School. Once the top floor was completed in 1929, it was renamed the Saint Augustine School.

The top floor was used as a high school for a long period, until the high school was transferred to Box Bar Road. The first teachers of the school were all priests, and the principal was Father Hagey. Later headmasters include well-known people like Mr. Sayer Joof and Pierre Njie.



*St. Augustine's School built by the Catholic Church.*



*One of the academic buildings for St. Joseph's High School, an all-girls high school built by the Catholic Church.*

### St. Joseph's High School

This is an all-girls high school built in 1967 at its present location on Box Bar Road, next to St. Augustine High School, an all-boys high school.

Originally, the school was located at Anglesea Street, not far from St. Augustine School and the Roman Church. The Church of the Holy Spirit built the school. The plan for the school and the church came from Australia by Bishop Michael Manori in 1967, and the Catholic Mission was responsible for its operation.

### Gambia High School

Built in 1959, Gambia High has been the only government-owned high school in the country. The building of the school at one time led to the closure of Boys High School.



*Gambia High School was the first government high school in the country.*

## Independence Drive Mosque

This was the first and only mosque in Banjul for many years and, until recently, the only mosque where Friday prayers were offered. It was built during the first half of the 19th century.

The land where the mosque was built was owned by one Bombeh Gaye. He was grandfather to the Gaye family on Dobson Street and a father to Omar Gaye Bombeh, who was at one time an imam of this mosque.

Bombeh, along with some elders acting as trustees (e.g., Delco Njie and others), went to the Governor to ask for permission to build the mosque.



*The Independence Drive Mosque is one of the oldest mosques in Banjul.*

## The Bedforce Place Building

The Bedforce Place or Education Building remains one of the most remarkable in the city because its use and functions have seen so many transformations. It was first used as the prison and the execution building. The execution part is the side on the left as you enter the Buckle Street gate.

A black flag would fly half staff on this building whenever executions were to take place. The prison was later transferred to Mile Two. It was later used as the power station in 1925, until the station moved to Half-Die. The building is now used as the headquarters for the Department of State for Education and is known as the Education Building.



*The Bedford building has a long history. Currently it houses the Department of State for Education.*

## Royal Victoria Hospital

This was one of the earliest buildings in Banjul, constructed during the 1840s. It was formerly called the Victoria Hospital and was built by settlers who came from Gorée.

## The UNDP Building

One of the strongest buildings among the existing pre-colonial structures, also built in the 1840s, is the United Nations Development Programme building. It was constructed by local people and supervised by Portuguese engineers.

It was first used as a military hospital and then for the United Nations offices. Now it is again being used as an office by the Gambian military.

The building has no iron reinforcing rods. It is a solid stone and lime construction like many of the major buildings built during this early period.

## The Parliament Building

The present Parliament Building is an example of modern architecture. The first structure was built much earlier, but with the turn of political events it became necessary for a larger house to be built where Parliament could sit.

The Parliament Building grounds are important because of the local story associated with them. The place used to be called Gui Camit. For a long time the trunk of a mango tree lay there, and people associated mysteries with it. The Kanyalangs (childless women) used to perform their rituals at the place so as to be blessed with children.



*The Gambian parliament as seen from the restaurant on top of the Arch 22 monument on Independence Drive.*

### The Maurel Prom Building

As soon as Banjul was settled, many traders came from Gorée and St. Louis in Senegal with their businesses. These early traders built houses, many of them along the sea front.

Maurel Prom and Maurel et Frères were French trading companies that came to Banjul in the 1880s.



*Part of the old Maurel and Prom building near the Albert Market. Maurel and Prom has been an active import-export company in The Gambia.*

### Commercial Buildings

Trading activities were encouraged on St. Mary's Island from the outset. Many of the early traders and commercial buildings included the Bathurst (Banjul) Trading Company, Ltd. (BTC), Maurel Prom, and Maurel et Frères. Many of these buildings can be found in and around Wellington Street (Liberation



*The front of the Albert Market. Inside are goods for Gambians and tourists alike. Daily, this is one of the busiest areas in Banjul.*

Avenue), Buckle Street, Lemay Street, and around the Albert Market.

The commercial buildings were constructed by colonial settlers such as Portuguese nationals, merchants, the British, and the French. The local Creole and Gurmet also built after their European masters.

### The National Museum Building

The Museum Building was built in the latter half of the 19th century by the British. It was formerly used as an entertainment or recreation center for Europeans resident in Banjul. As a result, it was used as a club for colonial masters and officers but excluded the African population. It was also at one time used as a residence for one of the officers to the Governor.

It later became the National Library Building and the National Museum in the early 1980s. It was



*Front view of the Gambian National Museum in Banjul.*

officially opened in 1985 as the National Museum, which is a depository and a center for cultural conservation and revival.

### “ARCH 22”

Completed in 1998, Arch 22 was named for the coup d'état of July 22nd, 1994. With its imposing structure and impressive statues, it gave the entrance to Banjul a sense of greatness and history.

The ground was previously used as a camp for insane people and was locally called Kerr Kissi. The camp for the insane was later moved to Mile Two and finally transferred to the Campama psychiatric wing. The ground was also used as a prayer ground for the Muslims.

Part of the area was also used as a cemetery for Europeans. Officials like the Colonial Secretary G.C.B. Paris died of malaria in 1929-30 and were



*Looking at Arch 22 from the Banjul side of Independence Drive.*



*Looking at Independence Drive towards Banjul from the top of Arch 22.*

buried there. Many others like William Temple Hamlin (the Auditor General), Mr. Steel, and the Maurel Prom staff were also buried there.

### “Krinting Houses” or “Bamboo Houses”

As more and more settlers and migrants came to the island from the surrounding region, there was need for cheaper houses to keep pace with population growth. “Krinting houses” became an affordable option for recent arrivals. The term “Krinting” refers to the way bamboo is woven together to form a mat that forms the inner part of the walls on these houses.

The materials used to make the houses are locally available and can either be collected by the people themselves or bought very cheaply. The bamboo sticks and the palm trunks used for pillars were readily available on or near the island. Most of the African migrants to Banjul built and lived in these houses.



*A Krinting House in the Half-Die section of Banjul.*



*Close-up of Krinting House showing the bamboo and wattle construction.*



## Wooden Houses

It was not until the 1840s that wooden houses became more common. Many of those remaining can be found in the old Portuguese Town area (Banjul Central), and especially along Long Street, Grant Street, and Allen Street. The residents of these houses were generally better off socioeconomically than the residents of krinting houses.



*One of the old wooden houses occupied at one time by more affluent members of Bathurst society, many of whom were Aku.*

## The Block Houses

As years wore on, and business and commerce flourished, residents on St. Mary's Island began to build cement block houses, almost like the commercial houses. They were built by mulattoes who were considered to be from wealthy families and were among the first to gain benefits from European education.



*An example of a block house that currently is in a poor state of repair. Many of these older houses are likely to disappear in the future because the cost for renovation is so expensive.*



*Close-up of the largest mosque in Banjul, built from funds donated to Gambians by the Saudis.*

